

# chapter I

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## *The Subject of History and How to Use It*

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Benjamin, Jules R. "The Subject of History and How to Use It." A Student's Guide to History. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. pp. 1-10.

### *What Historians Are Trying to Do*

Since the time when human beings invented writing, they have left records of their understanding of the world and of the events in their lives and how they felt about them. By studying the records that previous generations have left, we can find out about the kind of lives they led and how they faced their problems. We can use what we learn about the experiences of people who lived before us to help solve problems we face today. Though the modern world is quite different from the societies in which our ancestors lived, the story of their accomplishments and failures is the only yardstick by which we can measure the quality of our own lives and the success of our social arrangements.

All of us look into the past from time to time. We read historical novels or books about historical events. We gaze at old

photographs or listen to the stories our grandparents tell. Historians, however, make a serious and systematic study of the past and attempt to use the knowledge they gain to help explain human nature and contemporary affairs. Professional historians spend their lives pursuing the meaning of the past for the present. To amateurs, historical research is like a hobby, but their occasional journeys into the past may contribute to the store of human knowledge and can greatly influence their own lives. Your study and research as a student qualifies you as an amateur historian. Your study of the past is part of the same search for knowledge carried on generation after generation.

### *What History Can Tell You*

Everything that exists in the present has come out of the past, and no matter how new and unique it seems to be, it carries some of the past with it. The latest hit recording by the newest group is the result of the evolution of that group's musical style and of the trends in music and society that have influenced them. Perhaps their style developed from earlier rock styles associated with the Beatles, or perhaps they are taking off from even older folk themes used by Bob Dylan. Well, Dylan was influenced by Woodie Guthrie, who wrote his songs in the 1930s and whose music grew out of his contact with the heritage of American folk music from the nineteenth century, which in turn had come in great measure from earlier music in England and Scotland, some of which has its origins in the Middle Ages. So you can see that the house of the present is filled with windows into the past.

The car you ride in, although it may have been designed only a few years ago, carries within it the basic components of the "horseless carriage" of the turn of the century. Your car works because people who knew how to make carriages, bicycles, and engines put their ideas together in a new way. The knowledge necessary to make the carriages and bicycles came, in turn, from earlier inventions. Some, like the wheel, go back into the antiquity of human history.

Everything has a history. At least part of the answer to any question about the contemporary world can come from studying the circumstances that led up to it. The problem is to find

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those past events, forces, arrangements, ideas, or facts that had the greatest influence on the present subject you have questions about. The more you understand about these past influences, the more you will know about the present subject to which they are related.

### *History and the Everyday World*

Most of us are curious. Children are always asking their parents the "why" of things. When we grow up we continue to ask questions because we retain our fascination with the mysteriousness and complexity of the world. Because everything has a history, most questions can be answered, at least in part, by historical investigation.

What are some of the things about which you are curious? Have you ever wondered why women's skirts in old movies are so long, or why Frenchmen often embrace one another whereas Englishmen almost never do? Perhaps you have wondered how the Kennedy or Rockefeller families came to be rich, or why the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Have you thought about why most of the peoples of southern Europe are Catholic whereas most northern Europeans are not? Many oriental peoples bow when they greet one another; we shake hands. The questions could go on forever; all the answers are written somewhere in the record of the past.

The record of the past is not only contained in musty volumes on library shelves; it is all around us in museums, historical preservation, and the antique furnishings and utensils contained in almost every household. Our minds are living museums because the ideas we hold (for example, democracy, freedom, equality, competitiveness) have come down to us by way of a long historical journey. Though we are usually unaware of it, the past is always with us. Because history is literally at our fingertips, we can travel back into it without difficulty.

### *A Brief Journey into the Past*

If you have ever driven any distance, you have probably ridden over a system of very modern superhighways with high speed limits and no cross traffic or stoplights. This national highway network, built within the last fifteen years, connects all the major United States cities and is known as the inter-



state system. These roads were planned by the Eisenhower Administration in 1955, and, though they are the newest highways in the country, they have a history two decades long.

Looking for the marks of history in the world around us is something like the task of the geologist or archeologist. However, instead of digging down into the earth to uncover the past, the historical researcher digs into the visible, everyday elements of society to find the historical roots from which they sprang. The fact that the interstate highway system built in the 1960s and 1970s had its origins in the 1850s is just, so to speak, the uppermost layer of history. If a study of the newest highways can take us back twenty years, what about the historical roots of the older highways or of the country roads? How far into the past can we travel on them?

Turn off the eight-lane interstate, past the gleaming Exxon station, past the orange roof of the Howard Johnson restaurant, past the bright signs before the multistoried Holiday Inn, and onto, say, U.S. Route 51 or 86. These are older highways, built mostly in the 1940s and 1950s. Being from an earlier period, like older strata of rock, perhaps they can tell us something of life in an earlier period of America.

When you leave the interstate system for this older road network you first notice that the speed limit is lower and that many of the buildings are older. As you ride along at the slower pace there are no signs saying "Downtown Freeway 38 miles" or "Indiana Turnpike—Exit 28N." They say "Lubbock 38 miles," or "Cedar Rapids 14 miles." As you approach Lubbock or Cedar Rapids, you will see motels less elaborate than the Holiday Inn. They may be small wooden cottages with fading paint and perhaps a sign that says "Star Motor Court" or "Stark's Tourist Cabins." Instead of Howard Johnson's or McDonald's, you may pass "Betty's Restaurant" or "Little River Diner." If you pay close attention to these buildings and do not become distracted by the more modern structures between them, you can take a trip into history even as you ride along. All of the older restaurants, stores, and gas stations you see were built before the large shopping centers and parking lots that separate them, and they are clues to the history of the highway on which you are riding. Places like the Star Motor Court and the Little River Diner probably were built when

the road was new. Unless they have been modernized, they are relics of a previous historical period—when men named Roosevelt and Truman were president and when the cars that rode by looked like balloons with their big rounded hoods, trunks, and fenders. The diner isn't air-conditioned, and the sign over the tourist cabins proudly proclaims that they are "heated." This is the world of the 1930s and 1940s.

Now turn off the highway at State Route 104 where the sign says "Russell Springs 3 miles" or where it says "Hughesville 6 miles." Again the speed limit drops, and the bright colors fade further away. You are on a road that may have been built in the 1920s or 1930s or earlier (in older sections of America the country roads can go back a hundred years or more). Time has removed many of the buildings that once stood along this road, but if you look closely, the past is there ready to speak to you. The gas station here has only one set of pumps, and the station office sells bread, eggs, and kerosene. The faded advertisements on the wall display some products that you have never heard of—NeHi Orange and Red Man Chewing Tobacco. If you see a restaurant or motel, it may be boarded up because the people who used to stop in on their way to Russell Springs of Hughesville now go another way or may no longer live in the country but in a nearby city. However, many of the homes along Route 104 are still there. They were built when only farmland straddled the road, and they may go back to a time when horses and not internal combustion engines pulled the traffic past the front door. Such relics of early technology as old washing machines and refrigerators may stand on the tilting wooden porches, and a close look behind the tall weeds beside the dirt driveway may reveal the remains of a 1936 La Salle. As you stop before one of the old farmhouses, the past is all around you, and, although the place does not appear in its youthful form, a little imagination can reconstruct what life was like here on the day in 1933 when Roosevelt closed all the banks or the day in 1918 when the Great War in Europe ended.

The line linking past to present never breaks, and the house itself has a history, as do the people who once lived in it. In this sense, every house is haunted with its own past, and a keen eye can see the signs. Enter the house and you can see the



stairway that was rebuilt in 1894, and the fireplace in the main bedroom upstairs, which was put in about 1878, the year the house was built. Perhaps the old Bible on the table near the bed notes the year the family came to the United States, and the dates in the early nineteenth century when the parents of the immigrants who built the house were born.

The story could go on forever, although the evidence would become slimmer and slimmer. You could find out from county records who owned the land before the house was built, going back perhaps to the time when the people who lived on the land were red, not white. In distance you may have traveled only ten or twenty miles from the interstate highway and it may have taken you less than an hour, but by looking for the signs of the past in the present, you have traveled a hundred years or more into history.

If you think and study about the passage of time between the old farmhouse on the country road and the gleaming service station by the interstate, you may come to understand some of the social, political, and economic forces that moved events away from the old wooden porch and sent them speeding down the interstate highway. The more you know about this process, the more you will learn about the times when the farmhouse was new and the more you will understand how the interstate highway came about, what you are doing riding on it, and into what kind of a future you may be heading.

Historians don't usually wander into history in such a casual fashion. They have to be trained in their methods of investigation and analysis. As an introduction to your own historical research and study, the next section will describe some of the tools employed by historians in their examination of the records of the past.

### *How Historians Work*

Like you, historians are challenged by the complexity of the world, and many want to use their studies of the past to help solve the problems of the present. The questions that can come to mind are numberless, and serious historical investigators must choose wisely among them. They do not want to spend a lot of effort pursuing the kind of question to which history has no answer (for example, "What is the purpose of

the Universe?" "Am I a lovable person?" "Who is the smartest person in the world?"). Nor do they want to struggle to achieve the solution to a problem that is not of real importance. (Historical investigation can probably tell you who wore the first pair of pants with a zipper in it, but that might not be worth knowing.) The main difficulty facing historians is not eliminating unanswerable or unimportant questions, but choosing among the important ones.

A historian's choice among important questions is determined by personal values, by the concerns of those who support the historian's work, by the nature of the time in which the historian lives, or by a combination of all of these. The ways in which these influences operate are very complex, and often historians themselves are unaware of them.

Historians investigate the questions they choose to study in many ways. Their particular approach depends on their academic training and their belief about which aspects of human nature and the human environment are most important to an understanding of their subject. Traditionally, historians have been divided into those who saw social, cultural, intellectual, political, diplomatic, economic, or psychological matters as central to answering the question being investigated. The social historian investigates the development of human groups and communities and their interaction with the larger society in which they emerge. The cultural and intellectual historian deals with the meaning of ideas and attitudes and their effect upon social changes. The political historian focuses on the operation and acts of governments, parties, and institutions, whereas diplomatic historians deal with relations between governments. The economic historian studies developments in technology, production, consumption, and the division of wealth. Most recently, a group known as psychohistorians have centered their investigations on the emotional development of individuals and families.<sup>1</sup>

When the historian has chosen his or her subject, many

<sup>1</sup> Historians also have been divided according to their particular philosophies of history. These are complex systems that try to explain the larger course and meaning of history. If you wish to look into this question, seek advice from your instructor.



questions still remain. For example, does historical evidence dealing with the subject exist, and if so, where can it be found? If someone wanted to study gypsy music from medieval Europe, and that music was never written down or mentioned in historical accounts of the period, then little or nothing can be found about this subject through historical research. Even if records exist on a particular subject, the historian may be unaware of them or unable to locate them. Perhaps the records are in an unfamiliar language or are in the possession of individuals or governments that deny access to them. Sometimes locating historical evidence can be a problem.

Having determined that records *do* exist and that they can be located and used, the historian faces another and more important problem: What is the credibility or reliability of the evidence? Is it genuine? *How accurate* are the records, and what biases were held by those who wrote them? If sources of information are in conflict, which is correct? Or is it possible that most of the sources are in error? Historians must pick and choose among the sources they uncover, and that is not always easy to do. The historian's own biases, as well, cloud the picture, making impartial judgment extremely difficult.

There are two basic forms of historical evidence: primary and secondary. Primary evidence records the actual words of someone who participated in or witnessed the events described. These can be newspaper accounts, diaries, notebooks, letters, minutes, interviews, and any works written (or otherwise recorded, as in photographs) by persons who claim firsthand knowledge of an event. Another primary source is official statements by established organizations or significant persons—royal decrees, church edicts, political party platforms, laws, and speeches.

Secondary evidence records the findings of someone who did not observe the event but who investigated primary evidence. Most history books fall into this category, although some are actually tertiary evidence because they rely not on primary evidence but are themselves drawn from secondary sources. When your own history research paper is finished, it will be secondary, or more likely, tertiary evidence to anyone who may use it in the future.

The problem of determining the reliability of evidence is a

serious one. Secondary and even primary evidence can be fraudulent, inaccurate, or biased. Eyewitness accounts may be purposely distorted in order to avert blame or to bestow praise on a particular individual or group. Without intending to misinform, even on-the-scene judgments can be incorrect. Sometimes, the closer you are to an event, the more emotionally involved you are, and this distorts your understanding of it. We can all recall events in which we completely misunderstood the feelings, actions, and even words of another person. Historians have to weigh evidence carefully to see if those who participated in an event understood it well enough to have accurately described it, and whether later authors understood the meaning of the primary documents they used. Official statements present another problem—that of propaganda or concealment. A government, group, or institution may make statements that it wishes others to believe, but that are not true. What a group says may not be what it does. This is especially true in politics.

To check the reliability of evidence, historians use the tests of consistency and corroboration: Does the evidence contradict itself and does it agree with evidence from other sources? Historical research always involves checking one source against another.

The bias of a source also presents difficulties. People's attitudes toward the world influence the way they interpret events. For example, you and your parents may have different attitudes toward music, sex, religion, or politics. These differences can cause you to disagree with them about the value of a rock concert, a Sunday sermon, or the president. Historians have their own attitudes toward the subjects they are investigating, and these cause them to draw different conclusions about the character and importance of religious, political, intellectual, and other movements. Later historians must take these biases into account when weighing the reliability of evidence.

In analyzing the evidence, the historian must find some way of organizing it so that he or she can make clear its meaning. A mass of facts and opinions concerning a subject is not a historical study. The task of the trained historian is to arrange the material so that it supports a particular conclusion. This conclusion may have been in the historian's mind at the outset, or it



might be the result of investigation. If the evidence does not appear to support the conclusion, however, then the historian must either change that conclusion or seek other evidence to support it.

Once a historian is satisfied that research has uncovered sufficient evidence to support a particular conclusion, then he or she works to display the evidence in a manner that will clearly show that the conclusion drawn is a proper one. If any evidence that leads to other conclusions is uncovered, the historian has a responsibility to include it. In doing so, he or she must show how the supporting evidence is stronger than the nonsupporting evidence. There are many ways of organizing evidence in support of a conclusion. The historian's arguments in favor of a particular conclusion must be strong and convincing, and the logic of these arguments must not be faulty.

Recently, in an effort to eliminate error, bias, and faulty logic as much as possible, some historians have turned to techniques from mathematics and science to handle historical evidence and test conclusions. These historians prefer to deal with quantitative or uniform data that are easily comparable and that can be interpreted by mathematical formulas. Such researchers often use computers to analyze their data. They question historical findings involving opinion and judgment and look to types of evidence (usually statistical) that can test the more intuitive conclusions of other historians. The kinds of problems they deal with are usually narrow, and they have to be well trained in techniques of statistical analysis. Their tests of evidence are sophisticated and are becoming more so. The extent to which the study of history can or should become "scientific" is an important current debate among historians. (For some sources on quantitative historical data see Appendix A, section 8.)

APUSH

Mr. Jenkins  
Day 1 Assignment

Read: Chapter 1 in Zinn  
Chapter 1 in Bailey

Reaction Paper:  
Why study history?

Write a one paragraph response to the above question. I prefer you  
respond to the question based upon your personal views.

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